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SUBJECT: RISE IN MASS INCIDENTS WORRISOME BUT NOT YET A THREAT TO OVERALL STABILITY, CONTACTS SAY

REF: 08 BEIJING 2839

Classified By: Acting Political Minster Counselor Ben Moeling. Reasons
1.4 (b/d).

Summary

1. (C) A jump in the number of "mass incidents," or violent protests against local governments, in June is unrelated to the recent ethnic riots in Xinjiang and does not signal a threat to overall social stability, Embassy contacts report. However, violent incidents indicate serious discontent below the surface that will worsen over time. The underlying causes are longstanding citizen hostility toward local officials due to corruption and abuse of power in China's Communist Party-controlled political order. Moreover, vested interests are pushing their demands more aggressively during a year of politically sensitive anniversaries, calculating that the authorities will be more inclined to compromise in the interest of maintaining stability. The Party has responded by boosting anti-riot training for local officials, temporarily broadening the boundaries for expression of public opinion on the Internet while simultaneously targeting specific websites for tight control, and attempting to re-invigorate village elections. Contacts tell us that on campus, a tight student job market will not likely lead to destabilizing political activism in the short run, but the rise of left-wing nationalism is a trend to watch. The Xinjiang riots are different in kind and origin, but, like mass incidents, show the volatility of pent-up frustration and anger across China. End Summary.

Violent Protests in June: Hubei and Jiangxi

2. (C) A wave of new "mass incidents" (China's term for protest activity that the leadership views as threatening to stability) erupted in June in several parts of China and was widely reported in local media. In one of the two major incidents, a June 17-20 riot in Shishou City, Hubei Province, was triggered by the mysterious death of a chef in a government-owned hotel. The number of rioters quickly swelled from a few dozen to thousands as rumors spread that the chef was murdered by the hotel manager, in league with city officials, for threatening to disclose an alleged drug ring run out of the hotel. The riot was quelled after hundreds of rioters were injured in clashes with security forces and many police vehicles were damaged or destroyed. Another large protest was staged by more than one hundred furniture makers in Nankang City, Jiangxi Province, on June 15. The furniture makers gathered in front of the city government building to protest a new tax on the industry already hit hard by declining export demand. The Nankang demonstrators overturned police vehicles and blocked a major highway for several hours. The protest subsided the same day when municipal authorities rescinded the tax on orders from the provincial governor.

Mass Incidents Are Not All the Same

3. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX emphasized to PolOff on June 26 that the Hubei and Jiangxi incidents, respectively, represented different kinds of social protests even though both were indicative of simmering discontent lying just below the surface of Chinese society. He said that Shishou was similar to the Weng'an riots in Guizhou

Province last year in which pent-up anger toward the government erupted spontaneously in response to an event that had little or no relationship to the immediate concerns or grievances of the protestors. (Note. See ref: as many as 30,000 protestors rioted for several days in June 2008, destroying the Wengan Party headquarters and other official property. The local Party Secretary eventually resigned.) While disturbing to the leadership, such events were nonetheless isolated, localized incidents that could be contained, XXXXXXXXXXXX observed. The violence in Jiangxi, on the other hand, represented a systemic problem, in XXXXXXXXXXXX view. This kind of protest was more dangerous, he said, because it was issue-driven and affected interests that cut across local and regional boundaries, and hence held the potential to spread to other areas.

14. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX said it was very difficult to assess the overall impact of mass incidents on social stability, but, like XXXXXXXXXXXX, he stressed the importance of distinguishing between the spontaneous, random violence of Weng'an and Shishou and protests driven by the clash of

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"vested interests" (liyi you guanfang). In a meeting with PolOff on June 30, XXXXXXXXXXXX said that Weng'an-type riots tended to be "seasonal" in nature, occurring during the summer when lots of people were in the streets. The Jiangxi protest, on the other hand, was triggered by those with vested interests of all kinds. XXXXXXXXXXXX stated that there had been many such protests recently: In addition to the widely publicized taxi-driver strikes in several provinces, there had been bus driver strikes, elementary and middle-school teacher strikes (Chongqing), and wharf worker and boatmen strikes (in Guizhou), among others, all of which involved disputes over salaries. XXXXXXXXXXXX said the timing of these strikes and protests was deliberate. Once Party leaders had declared 2009 a year of sensitive anniversaries and had called for redoubled efforts to ensure "harmony" and stability, people pressed hard for the government to satisfy their demands, calculating that authorities would be more responsive in order to maintain stability.

Underlying Cause: China's Party System

15. (C) The heart of the problem, XXXXXXXXXXXX explained, was a political order that gave local officials enormous power, including control over the distribution of wealth and the resources to ensure that their own interests were well served. As a result, XXXXXXXXXXXX said, this "structural contradiction" had resulted in a long-term hostile environment, characterized by a breakdown of trust between local officials and residents and near-total lack of official credibility. When officials spoke, XXXXXXXXXXXX said, "no one pays attention" because "no one believes anything a cadre says." In his view, this situation unfairly penalized those officials who were capable and honest, with a recent case in Zhengzhou, Henan province being the most recent example. In a slip of the tongue that brought the point home, a Zhengzhou official became the focus of Internet praise and ridicule when he admitted in a public exchange with a reporter that China's media and local officials served the interests of the Party rather than the people. In response to a state-owned radio reporter's criticism of city officials for illegally building luxury villas on land that had been allocated for low-income housing, the official angrily shot back "for whom do you speak, the Party or the people," with the clear implication that he and the reporter both spoke for the Party. The reporter, apparently not realizing the implications of the remark, published it as an example of imperious officialdom. Some netizens praised the official for speaking the truth while others mocked him for blatantly ignoring the interests of ordinary people. The phrase "for whom do you speak" became the catch phrase of the day on the Internet, a symbol of people's deep distrust of officials and anger at the systemic disregard for rule of law and citizen rights. This was a "structural" problem, XXXXXXXXXXXX repeated, embedded in the nature of the cadre system, which even President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao had so far been unable to crack, despite robust efforts. The situation could only get worse before it gets better, XXXXXXXXXXXX concluded, thus, "we can expect more and more "mass incidents."

¶6. (C XXXXXXXXXXXX, too, asserted that "structural contradictions" lay at the heart of the mass incident problem. People saw official machinations, corruption, or avarice behind every negative event, he said, noting the recent collapse of a 13-story building in Shanghai as the most recent example of this mindset. Shanghai was one of China's better-run cities, with an experienced and savvy cadre force and a clean Party Secretary, XXXXXXXXXXXX opined, but people immediately jumped to the conclusion that corruption was the culprit. (Note: Chinese media have since reported that the collapse was caused by inept construction workers who allowed dirt to pile up on one side of the building even as they excavated a deep hole on the other side.) However, this lack of trust and credibility showed a deeper flaw in China's political order. As a result, XXXXXXXXXXXX predicted, more mass incidents lay ahead. Although people blamed local officials for their problems and still viewed the central government as their last hope for redress of grievances this could change if the financial crisis persisted.

Rights Lawyer: no Threat to Stability

¶7. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX told PolOffs on June 23 that he thought that mass incidents had not reached a stage where they posed a threat to China's overall stability. While they represented an expression of general anger over citizens' personal situations and deep resentment toward Party officials, they were still localized. XXXXXXXXXXXX said the underlying dynamic was a self-perpetuating cycle

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of violence and counter-violence on both sides born of a "contradiction" in citizen-official relationships. If local authorities were actually to follow the law, he observed, this would mean relaxing control and allowing more freedom of expression. People would respond by criticizing the government or by making demands that authorities were not willing to meet. Thus, XXXXXXXXXXXX explained, authorities kept a tight lid on all social discontent which in turn fostered seething resentment that periodically erupted into violent protest. The official response to these protests often amplified popular anger and frustration, thus continuing the cycle. There will be no "Chinese Gorbachev," he exclaimed, no breakthrough in the short term. The only answer, in XXXXXXXXXXXX's view, was continued, gradual, and patient education in "the spirit of rule of law" among the people to eliminate their "slave mentality."

Cadre Training, Internet Control, Local Elections

¶8. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX said that the "lessons of Weng'an," both positive and negative, had been carefully studied by central authorities and that, in anticipation of an upsurge in protests this year, the central government had launched an ambitious program of anti-riot and crowd-control training for local officials. Three thousand county level administrators, 3,000 county-level public security directors, 2,000 county-level discipline inspection directors and 500 local procuratorate cadres had already completed such training in Beijing. They were in turn expected to train the relevant personnel in subordinate jurisdictions.

¶9. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX also claimed that the Party had been following a carefully calibrated approach to Internet control during the year, especially in the runup to National Day, allowing more general expression of public opinion, while targeting specific websites for close monitoring. The highly publicized webchats with netizens conducted by Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao earlier in the year were designed to reinforce the public perception that top leaders were encouraging greater public discussion on the Internet, according to XXXXXXXXXXXX. XXXXXXXXXXXX himself had noticed a significant uptick in the volume of Internet chatter, including provocative commentary on sensitive issues. (Note: Recent examples include an article in the June 1 issue of the Xinhua-owned news weekly Outlook Weekly (Liaowang) analyzing the factors that contribute to mass incidents and predicting a significant increase of such events this year; and a blog by a Shishou official who was critical of the city government's efforts to "mislead the public" by blaming the riot on local criminals. The official

called for an objective analysis of the causes of the riots, which he attributed to poor government and police corruption in Shishou, to prevent such events in the future.)

110. (C) At the same time, XXXXXXXXXXXX said, the Party was targeting "ideological" and "protest" websites of both the right and the left for more aggressive monitoring. In addition to the usual practice of issuing propaganda guidance by telephone, text message, or by directives to select webmasters, propaganda authorities were now designating specific websites as sites of special concern. He said that the State Council and Beijing Information Offices recently convened a meeting of Internet monitors to discuss tight control of seven websites: Two ultra-left sites, Utopia (wuyou zhi xiang) and Maoflag; a site featuring a wide range of reform-oriented urban middle-class views, Boke (Bokee); and four sites with a "liberal" reputation frequented by professionals and intellectuals: Xici, Tianya, Tianyi, and China Elections. XXXXXXXXXXXX; XXXXXXXXXXXX said that he had been told by a friend with Internet monitoring responsibility that there would be a drastic tightening up on Internet content next year, once the sensitive commemoration season was over.

111. (C) Taking a somewhat different tack, XXXXXXXXXXXX told PolOff on XXXXXXXXXXXX that, in light of high-profile unrest incidents, the Communist Party was looking to revitalize village elections as a means of relieving social pressures and providing a nonviolent outlet to political grievances. Specifically, the Party's Central Organization Department had recently convened a meeting on ensuring compliance with existing legislation mandating regular village elections. In recent years apathy and corruption on the part of local officials had resulted in many villages failing to hold elections as required by law. According to XXXXXXXXXXXX, the Party viewed this as a dangerous trend that could exacerbate the simmering grievances. Nonetheless, XXXXXXXXXXXX was not optimistic that village elections could realize the Party's goal of reducing the frequency of unrest.

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Student Activism: Leftist Nationalism, Not Employment

112. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX said he didn't foresee a stability problem emerging from the tight job market for graduating college students, but he was concerned about the increase of "radical nationalism" and a "leftward drift" among college students that could lead to destabilizing student activism in the future. Graduating seniors and graduate students at China's elite universities were having no trouble finding jobs, he said, although those from second- and third-tier universities were running into greater obstacles. However, potential discontent over job pressure was offset by the many graduates who had responded to the Party's call, and incentives, to take jobs in the hinterland and by the thousands more who were lining up to join the military. Growing student nationalism, on the other hand, was a trend to be concerned about, in XXXXXXXXXXXX's view, especially when wedded to "leftist" politics. He said he had warned Party leaders that the student threat of the future would not come from pro-democracy activists but from the anti-democratic left who may take to the streets to demand a return to "true socialism." XXXXXXXXXXXX estimated that as many as 20 percent of the students at People's University were "left-leaning radical nationalists." Many, he said, were active on the ultra-left web portal "Utopia" where they posted comments under the rubric of "the alliance of citizens on the left" (gongmin zuo lianmeng).

Mass Incidents Are Not Ethnic Riots

113. (C) Ethnic riots like those in Xinjiang July 5-7 and in Tibet in March of 2008 differ markedly in origin and nature from mass incidents, XXXXXXXXXXXX emphasized to PolOff on XXXXXXXXXXXX. Both present serious problems for the Party, XXXXXXXXXXXX said, but the Party leadership would not hesitate to open fire on Uighurs or Tibetans if they deemed it necessary to restore order. Mass incidents pose a different kind of threat, he said, as the leadership is "afraid" to fire on Han rioters for fear of sparking massive public outrage that would turn against

the Party. XXXXXXXXXXXX told PolOff on
XXXXXXXXXXXX that the Xinjiang riots and the June
mass incidents were different in kind but shared an important
similarity. In her view, at least some rioters in Xinjiang
took to the streets because of general discontent unrelated to
the immediate cause of the violence. Han people do not hate
Uighurs and are not looking for revenge, she said, but some
people "can always find an excuse to express their grievances."

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